

Holocaust and Totalitarian Systems Studies at the Jagiellonian University

‘All activities to further and deepen knowledge about totalitarianism are necessary. For this is an acquaintance with the truth, and this is after all the university’s mission. As a university we are 650 years old. Yet one thing is unchanged – the university’s mission, which is besides teaching as much the quest for truth. This is a completely timeless value.’ With these words the rector of the Jagiellonian University, Prof. Wojciech Nowak related himself in his discussion with students of the ‘Memento’ Academic Circle to the idea of creating at the Jagiellonian University a specialist MA programme on the European Studies degree – Holocaust and Totalitarian Studies. It is worth also emphasising that this is to date the only degree programme of this type in Poland.

There is no doubt that the Holocaust, being one of the most important moral and educational callings for European civilisation, should find itself within the canon of academic teaching – for indeed the role of the Jagiellonian University is not simply the professional creation of graduates but first and foremost the inciting within young people of a sensitivity to the ethical callings of modern times, within which the moral line is a deepening of knowledge about the past. The news of the creation of a new, unique field of specialisation at the Jagiellonian University met with a most positive reaction amongst individuals well-known in the world of science, culture, and politics and who sent to the university favourably disposed opinions of support: Andrzej Wajda supported the correctness of the idea ‘that the Jagiellonian University has taken on itself from amongst its numerous other obligations the additional duty to make clear to our young people what exactly the Holocaust was and what is totalitarianism;’ Jerzy Buzek pointed out the indisputably important fact that is the proximity of Cracow to the National Museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau: ‘It is important that here, not far from *Auschwitz, where the greatest human tragedy took place, we talk of human rights, we talk of what*

brought upon us this great damnation in history,' and Stefan Wilkanowicz – fulfilling at the time the function of Council Head of the International Centre for Education on Auschwitz and the Holocaust – spoke of the still current lesson that comes from the experience of the Holocaust and totalitarianism and that 'because a variety of dangers constantly threaten us both in Europe and beyond, and this is a great test for humanity.'

The educational challenge placed before students by the authors of this new field of specialism requires not only intellectual qualities but also the ability to ask difficult questions, ones to which the students will not receive simple or axiomatic answers. This fact was pointed out by the deputy Rector for Teaching, Prof. Andrzej Mania:

The Holocaust is seen within people's consciousness as the tragedy of an entire nation which was to be exterminated, it is the symbolism of an exceptional concentration of criminal will directed to the annihilation of an entire nation. Thanks to this degree programme we will be able to attempt to understand the Holocaust, but we will have an opportunity to reflect also on whether there is not something dramatic, some element within state mechanisms, in human nature that means that even a nation like the Germans of the day could to be infected. Therefore the choice of such a degree gives an opportunity to not only understand historical or cultural processes, the anthropological sphere but also to learn a sensitivity in studying dramatic questions. Here there is no room for trivial questions only for those which can affect someone, can offend someone, yet if they are correctly formulated they can allow us to reach for the heart of the matter. Therefore we will gain much, we will gain knowledge about the subject of the degree but also we will acquire the abilities to study difficult questions. This is also one of the worthy points of the degree. We have the opportunity to gain knowledge, the abilities needed for analysis, but also those to shape our own positions. One needs to be someone who, having understood this, will be of the conviction that the duty of an enlightened man is to do everything so that this story is never to be relived. This degree course offers a lot, a lot more than the name alone suggests. We recommend it with the greatest of conviction.

The head of the Academic Council of the Centre for Holocaust Studies, Prof. Wiesław Kozub-Ciembroniewicz, has pointed out the specific socio-educational role in the teaching of the Holocaust and totalitarianism to the young generation: 'The tragic phenomena of the twentieth century were proof that liberal democracy, which is for us a value, has to be defended. This degree programme at the Jagiellonian University is a degree programme with a future, a degree programme that is most needed.'

Here one should mention the authors of this specialist conception. It is impossible within the framework of a short article to recall everyone involved in the project, therefore I will limit myself merely to the immediate circle of those that devised the programme and to its invaluable consultants. We were supported from the outset by the authorities of the Faculty of Political and International Studies in the persons of the dean, Prof. Bohdan Szlachta,

and the deputy dean for didactics, Prof. Andrzej Dudek, the authorities of the Institute of European Studies and its then director Prof. Zdzisław Mach and Dr. Mirosław Nataneł, responsible for didactics at the Institute. Dr Piotr Weiser of the Institute of the Middle and Far East was one of the first to initiate and edit the degree programme. In order for the degree programme to be constantly improved it underwent changes, as with every theoretical project in its contact with teaching practice. Meeting the suggestions of lecturers and the first graduates halfway, the teaching programme was constantly enhanced, adapting to the ever changing needs and expectations of the young. The courses and MA seminars conducted in English within the framework of the degree are an example of a compromise to reflect the increasing multinational nature of the university. Finally, in writing about the programme authors, it is necessary to point out the source of the initiative that is the Centre for Holocaust Studies (CHS) at WSMiP. For it was at the CHS that the idea for a specialist degree came about. The director of the CHS, Dr Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, had for many years run a course within the framework of faculty options at the Institute of European Studies and had involved herself in analysis of the emerging prejudices and conflicts. The attendance and student involvement in the discussions evolving from the seminars convinced her of the need for a new specialism. The author of this piece and at the same time degree coordinator was also surprised by the depth of interest on the part of students in a degree on the Holocaust. The pragmatism in relation to degree choice so propagated today has not stopped many young people from making the effort to confront their reality and convictions with that of the extreme experience of the 'times of disdain,' so final and distant in dimension. And, finally, one could not forget about one of the most important architects and initiators of the degree course – Prof. W. Kozub-Ciembroniewicz, who not only was Head of the Academic Centre Council, but was also dean of Faculty of International and Political Studies for two terms (2002–2008). The authors of the degree programme were to utilise their unique knowledge and the teaching and organisational experience obtained in positions of prominence. I will not hide the fact that the high academic standing of Professor W. Kozub-Ciembroniewicz helped immensely in breaking through the dense bureaucratic mesh of regulations. It is equally important to note that the personally sincere involvement of the professor in integrating students and staff through an array of meetings and events, not only academic but social, was vital to the success of the degree programme.

When in 2011 the Jagiellonian University Senate and the Faculty Council for International and Political Studies ratified the degree programme there was no doubt as to the need for its creation. However, during the course of the ratification procedures there arose the question as to the realisation of the

degree within the framework of European Studies and not at the University's Faculty of History, which initially seems the natural place for any education on the past. The creators of the programme realised, however, that an education programme on totalitarianism and first and foremost on the experience of the Holocaust should not be curtailed by temporal turning points, that remembrance – this specific paradigm utilised by researchers into the Holocaust – is not only perceived historically but also, and to a significant degree, philosophically, ethically, politically, sociologically and in relation to cultural studies. Such standards were guaranteed by among others the Institute of European Studies (IES), employing historians, sociologists, specialists in literature, political scientists, lawyers and cultural studies specialists. The then director of IES and one of the promoters of the new degree specialism was Prof. Z. Mach. He talked of the addressees of the new specialism, drawing attention to the complementarity of the degree: 'Students of European Studies are able to cope with their own heritage, with their own collective memory, seeing these most difficult questions within the context of their own broad interdisciplinary knowledge of Europe.'

This interdisciplinary conception, which was to guide the creators of this degree programme, was in accordance with international standards on the teaching of the Holocaust, particularly in Great Britain and the USA, where the programme *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* is interdisciplinary in character, combining not only various disciplines but also applying various methods of teaching. The study trips organised at the Institute, internships in places of remembrance, as well as meetings with those who survived, are as equally important as the conveying of theoretical knowledge during the course of lectures, seminars and tutorials. The degree programme integrated the hitherto existing teaching programme on the Holocaust at the Jagiellonian University, enriched by specialist lectures prepared specifically for the students of this new programme. Lecturers from outside the university were also invited to teach on the degree.

The teaching on offer for the new specialism included: courses by the eminent specialist in non-democratic systems of power (Prof. W. Kozub-Ciembroniewicz, the Jagiellonian University Institute of Political Science), classes on the hotly discussed public debate on Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust (Prof. Andrzej Żbikowski, Warsaw University, Centre for Holocaust Studies, The Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute of Philosophy and Sociology), the problem area of antisemitism and antisemitic propaganda (Dr J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, Dr Bartosz Kwieciński, CHS), and finally the issue of remembrance for the Holocaust, which still casts a long shadow over the European experience of history (Prof. A. Żbikowski, Dr J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, Dr B. Kwieciński). Students have the possibility not only to get to

know the course of the history of the Holocaust (Prof. Jacek Chrobaczyński, Dr Piotr Trojański, The Pedagogical University in Cracow), the extermination of the Roma (Prof. Witold Stankowski, Dagmara Mrozowska MA, IES UJ), but also to encounter representations of the Holocaust as depicted in the visual arts, literature and ethics (Prof. Czesław Porębski, Dr J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, Dr B. Kwieciński). An integral part of the programme is also an acquaintance with the history and culture of Polish Jews (Dr Edyta Gawron, Institute of Jewish Studies, Jagiellonian University). Besides a theoretical education, the devisers of the degree programme also thought of practical skills which would allow future graduates to take up employment as guides, and educators at places of remembrance (Dr P. Trojański). An especially valuable component of the degree are the lectures given in English. The conditions for degree completion as adopted at the Institute of European Studies make it mandatory for students to pass one course taught in a modern European language. The range of courses on offer was drawn up by Dr J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs and Prof. Jonathan Webber. Professor Webber also conducts seminars in English, preceded by lectures to enable students to acquire the skills needed to write academic papers in English; while seminars in Polish are conducted by Prof. W. Kozub-Ciembroniewicz and Prof. W. Stankowski. It is worth pointing out that the first year of graduates submitted MA dissertations of a high academic level, involving not only engagement in this difficult and traumatic subject area but also extensive archive research. The best of the graduates have the possibility to continue their research at Ph.D. level. In order to ensure internships for students at places of remembrance and research centres, the Centre for Holocaust Studies has issued 18 letters of intent and entered into cooperation with, among others, the following institutions: the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, the Museum – Memorial Site in Bełżec, the Gross-Rosen Museum, the Stutthof-Sztutowo Museum, the Museum of the History of Polish Jewry, The Auschwitz Jewish Centre in Oświęcim, the Galicia Jewish Museum, the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage, the Willa Decjusza Society, the Jewish Community Centre of Cracow, the Cross Foundation, the International Meeting House, the Jewish Historical Institute, the 'Open Republic' Association. The Jagiellonian University's Centre for Holocaust Studies, through using its international contacts and cooperation with the most important research centres in Europe, the USA and Israel, gives the best students the possibility to do an internship also at international academic and educational centres involved in research into the Holocaust and educational work in this field (for example at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Holocaust Museum in Washington or at Clark University in the USA, which offers Ph.D. scholarships). The students of the Centre are also included in international research projects on Holocaust remembrance and

the experience of totalitarianism. These include: Task Force for International Cooperation in Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, *Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah* or the project conducted at the Falstad Memorial and Human Rights Centre in Norway, in cooperation with research centres and institutions in Russia, Poland and the territory of former Yugoslavia. In order to incorporate degree students into the international research community, the staff of the Centre for Holocaust Studies have devised a *visiting professors* programme, which is intended to broaden the educational possibilities for MA and Ph.D. students. Guests of the Centre have been the following professors, artists and diplomats: A. Wajda, Shimon Redlich (Ben-Gurion University of Negev in Israel), Elizabeth Edelstein (Director of Education at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York), Jan Tomasz Gross (Princeton University), Karol Becker (College Seminar Hakibutzim), Wolf Kaiser (Deputy Director of the Wannsee Conference House), Moshe Zimmermann (the Hebrew University in Jerusalem), Michael Berenbaum (the University of Judaism in Los Angeles), Robert S. Wistrich, director of the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism (the Hebrew University in Jerusalem), as well as the ambassador of the United States of America: Christian Kennedy. Professor M. Zimmermann and Dr W. Kaiser have taught courses for the whole academic community at the Jagiellonian University. Such a rich teaching programme became the spark for the first year of students to set up the 'Memento' Academic Circle, whose academic guide was to be Dr B. Kwieciński. Subsequent Circle councils and presidents in the persons of Aleksandra Kalisz, Ewelina Malik, Magdalena Kopeć, Ewa Górzyńska have shown exceptional academic and organisation activity. It is difficult to enumerate all the initiatives undertaken in its short, for we are talking only about two years of existence. Besides the organisation of conferences, seminars with foreign academic and student participation, are study trips to sites of remembrance and Holocaust centres in Poland and Germany, of note have been the trips to further knowledge of Jewish culture in the Czech Republic and Lithuania. The students are a most integrated group, passionately geared to the promotion of their degree amongst younger age groups. The internal questionnaire conducted at the Centre for Holocaust Studies, whose aim was to find out the needs and expectations in relation to the study programme as well as the facilities available to students, anonymously showed that students were highly satisfied with the quality of the education received, highlighting the convivial atmosphere that reigns within the Centre and the most excellent relations between the years and amongst lecturers. To a large degree this favourable outcome is down to the efforts of Jolanta Makowska MA, head of the Centre's administration, who often excels in her efforts to promote the degree programme. The creation of a degree

specialisation in the Holocaust and totalitarianism is certainly the most important teaching project undertaken by the Centre though far from being the only one. In the academic year 2011/2012, inspired by the programme: *Fellowships at Auschwitz – For the Study of Professional Ethics*, lecturers associated with the Centre for Holocaust Studies proposed to the then Jagiellonian University Deputy Rector for Collegium Medicum, Prof. W. Nowak, that a course on the Holocaust be devised for students of the Faculty of Medicine, to be taught by eminent lecturers. Similar classes have been most successfully organised by prestigious American universities with the aim of making future doctors, lawyers, and journalists sensitive to the current ethical, legal, and deontological aspects that derive from the historical lesson of the Holocaust. Amongst the lecturers were specialists connected with the Centre (Prof. W. Kozub-Ciembroniewicz, Prof. Jan Woleński, Dr J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, Dr P. Weiser, Dr B. Kwieciński), as well as lecturers from Collegium Medicum (Prof. Jan Hartman, Prof. Aleksander B. Skotnicki). The course enjoyed immense popularity (over 170 students) and was highly rated in the annual evaluation questionnaires.

Despite its relative infancy when compared to other university degree programmes, this new specialisation already appears to have seeded itself amongst serious studies at the Jagiellonian University into a Polish and European remembrance of the Holocaust. This undertaking by Poland's oldest university constitutes an important step not only towards educating the attitudes of the younger generation but also in acquiring the intellectual tools and state of awareness to make a mature participation within the Polish and European debate into the Holocaust possible.

Bibliography

Folder and study programme (J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, B. Kwieciński, P. Weiser). Quotes are from transcripts of interviews found in a film on the new degree (produced by B. Kwieciński, 2011).